1771 – 1858

ROBERT OWEN

Celebrating 250th anniversary of Robert Owen



Social Reformer and Father of Co-operation

The **co-operative** membership

Central England Co-operative



The **co-operative** membership

Central England Co-operative

Born in Newtown, Wales on 14th May, 1771. Grew up during the industrial revolution. Influential with David Dale (from New Lanark where Owen went on to marry Dale's daughter, Caroline and eventually in 1800 with his business partners bought the Mills). Also, associated with The Arkwright's from Derbyshire mills and in particular to Belper and Cromford and the Strutt family – associated with the first Co-op in Derby).

This is a truly momentous occasion celebrating the birth of one of our founding Co-operative fathers Robert Owen. We, at Central England Co-op are incredible grateful for the vision and insight of Robert Owen that guides us today.

We must always remember our history and the sacrifices that others have made in their lives to ensure we have a Co-operative Movement fit for future generations.

We continue to deliver Owen's legacy to ensure co-operative and sustainable communities are always part of our decision making and that Robert Owen's legacy carries on beyond us. He is considered as the Father of Co-operation, but his influence stretched to being regarded by many as the father of socialism, of social enterprise, a prime mover of the trade union movement campaigner and creator of factory legislation, infant schools and the international labour organisation.

Owen's idea of 'sustainable communities' is at the forefront of Society again and more people are becoming aware of our impact on the environment. Many of the ideals that Owen spoke about, have come in and out of fashion for many generations. Today we can use Owen's life and work to showcase the current work of co-operatives as enterprising businesses with social and ethical standards and ways of being. ***The Co-op difference.***



Owen's career included both successes and failures but he left an impact on the Co-operative Movement, the trade unions and socialism. He changed the direction of the education system and encouraged businesses to think about their social responsibilities – people and planet – as well as profit.

Co-operators who took the best of Owen's thoughts are highlighted in this booklet. Dr William King, George Jacob Holyoake, William Lovett and Robert Owen ensured that member owned co-operatives and communities strived and developed the model we see today. At Central England Co-operative we are privileged to be part of this democratic movement and to wish Robert Owen a Happy 250th Birthday.

Debbie Robinson, *Chief Executive Officer, Central England Co-operative*

Overview

Owen was a born leader – believed that society could be transformed peacefully, without class struggle.

That ordinary working people should be able to enjoy education, good health, decent living conditions and recreation. Obviously this was not popular at the time as life was about making as much money as possible out of the workers.

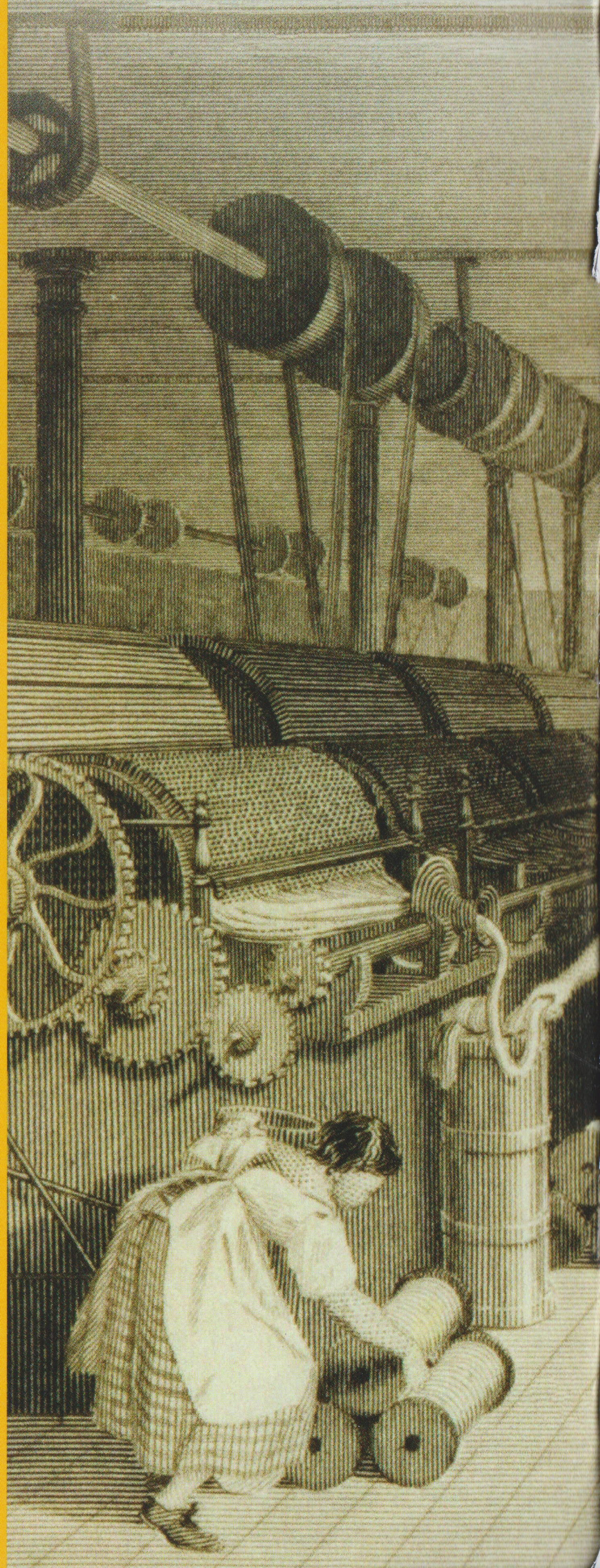
Owen tried lots of schemes to improve the lives of his workers, Co-operatives and Trade Unions are still helping people today.

Owen felt that workers should be treated properly. He worked hard to improve the conditions in his own factories, reducing working hours, cleaning up accommodation and providing schools. At the same time he continued to lobby and campaign for legislation to protect workers.

He did have some resistance from the workers to change but gained confidence when in 1806 he continued to pay his workers during a cotton embargo from the USA. Owen introduced new rules and regulations for the benefit of the workforce.

He advocated the idea that human beings possess rights and that these rights apply to everybody, irrespective of gender, religion, race or nationality. We still strive today for the same equality but in Owen's day campaigning of that sort was a prison sentence.

Owen's central purpose was to support democracy, self-government and co-operative advance through 'voluntary association', with education seen as the primary driver of social change.



Child Labour and Working Hours

When Owen took over the New Lanark Mills he refused to let children under the age of ten work in the mills; older children could not work more than 14 hours and he gave them time off for meals, despite protests from his business partners. The hours were reduced to 12. Eventually, Owen was credited as the first person to introduce the 8 hour workday and proved production was just as successful on limited hours.

His slogan was: ***Eight hours' labour, Eight hours' recreation, Eight hours' rest***

Working hours changed, not just for children, but for all mill workers. Owen believed that education and environment was essential. Adults were encouraged to attend evening classes and lectures and a weekly concert. Also, encouragement was given to walking by the river and the beautiful waterfalls in their leisure time.

Child Labour

The statue of Robert Owen situated outside the Co-operative Bank in Manchester, shows him protecting a child – his opposition to child labour was pioneering.

In 1816, Owen opened the Institution for the Formation of Character in New Lanark.

The infant school was also opened in this year and excluded artificial rewards or punishments. There were no prizes for good conduct and no punishment for disobedience or idleness. No lesson exceeded 45 minutes to avoid boredom. Each subject was made attractive and taught as far as possible through maps, pictures and natural objects.

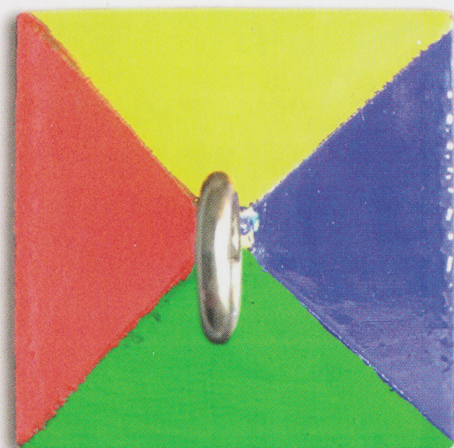


Photograph by Mike Peel (www.mikepeel.net)

Owen's schools where children were educated "without punishment or any fear of it", were as well-known as the working-conditions in his mills.

Educating of infants was the beginning of the process of nurture. The quest for happiness was to inspire all the pioneers of Co-operation. Happiness is indeed, the greatest good. "the one thing needful".

Most historians of education would now accept that Owen was responsible for founding the first Infant School in Britain.

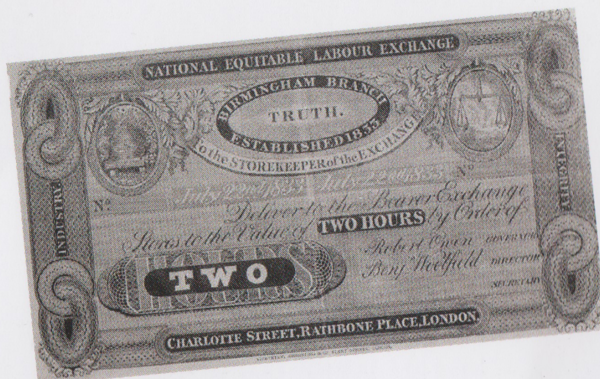


Silent Monitor

Owen introduced a unique system of discipline at New Lanark. Rather than subjecting his workers to corporal punishment they were all given a four-sided piece of wood. These silent monitors were hung by each worker and would be used by the superintendents to show how each worker had behaved. The four sides were painted a different colour to represent the four types of behaviour. Bad, indifferent, good and excellent.

Labour Notes

Robert Owen tried in 1832 to introduce the notion of Labour Exchanges. Work, or labour was given a value. Money was expressed in the value of hours worked. (this is similar to the modern practice of LETTS systems). Started in London and Glasgow, its success was short lived, as there were disputes between skilled and "low" skilled workers, and women whose work was valued as less than men's. It collapsed in 1834.



Achievements

Robert Owen - successful businessman in the textile industry.

Born in Newtown, Wales. He became a social entrepreneur and worked his way up to become the owner of cotton mills. At the age of 29 moved to New Lanark to become Manager.

He became known as Mr. Owen, the philanthropist. Not only for the mills but for the community alongside this attracted worldwide attention.

He advocated practical remedies for economic depression, such as the national provision of work for the unemployed in "villages of co-operation", where they would be self-supporting and large-scale currency reform. He demanded factory legislation to protect by law the labour of children and pressed for the establishment of a national system of education.

In 1825 Owen sold his mills in New Lanark and purchased a settlement in Indiana town, USA with his partners. This settlement was renamed New Harmony in a community experiment. It failed after 3 years but mainly because of private enterprise being too

New Lanark Mills

ingrained. However, he never stopped working on creating co-operative communities. He thought they would be ready to govern themselves advantageously. He supplied land, houses and the use of much capital, but experience proved that the attempt was premature to unite a number of strangers not primarily educated for the purpose, who should carry on extensive operations for their common interest and live together as a common family.

While in the USA Owen helped the establishment of some of the first nursery and infant schools, first free library, first dramatic club and first free public school system. The Minerva Society was also created; this was one of the first organised women's clubs. Owen's sons stayed in the US where Robert Dale Owen became a US Congressman and Bill and David Owen worked on the founding of the Smithsonian Institution which is now a leading educational facility.

When Owen returned to England in 1828 he discovered that he was regarded as the pioneer of a movement. The ideals of Co-operation – co-operative production, consumption and education, appealed to the working people with more force and authority than they would have appealed to other sections of the community. The Owenites, as they were known, were in many respects even more of a portent than Owen.



New Lanark Mills

While away in America, Dr. William King who lived in Brighton, had admired Robert Owen for over 20 years and with a William Bryan helped to set up co-operative shops and developed ways of ordinary people gathering funds together into an Auxiliary Fund in order to sell the goods of Co-operative Productive Societies. So where Owen had provided the Co-operative aim, King provided the means for its fulfilment. He saw that the profits from a shop could finance its own community.

King also used the Owenite moral approach of knowing that an educated workforce would acquire knowledge and virtue, and so produce all the wealth in the world. Sadly Owen and King's relationship broke down due to their religious and political differences. However, the early seeds of co-operation and the Co-operative Movement were planted for future generations. So when Owen died at the age of 89 he was remembered as one of the most gifted, clearest, most striking individual and visionaries of our time.

Knowledge and Union are Power:

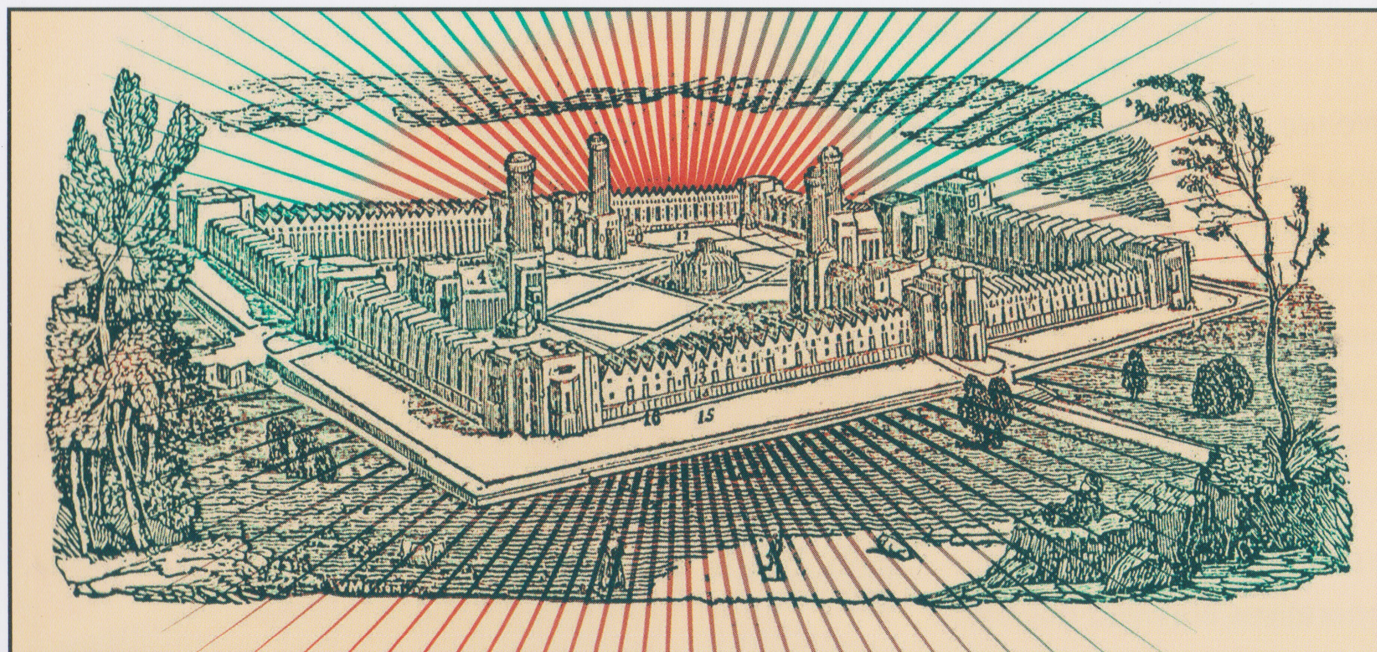
Power Directed by Knowledge is Happiness; Happiness is the end of creation.

1839 – Harmony Hall at Queenswood in Hampshire – the members of the community used to sing on Owen's birthday.

"When Social Friends, united, greet
The many they honour and obey
What can give pleasure half so sweet
As cheers them on his natal day?
Hail! Great Founder Great Founder of the Plan
Of Social Happiness for Man"

Owen would have approved of the co-operation in countries like India and Nigeria. He was a pioneer of what we now call "community development".

Owen's vision was about having a "whole view" of Society and would have had a manifesto of Co-operative Principles. His explanation of character meant not temperament, but the individual's structure of moral values.



Owen's vision for New Harmony, Indiana, USA

Owen's limitations as well as his strength need to be remembered in assessing his significance.

However, we should continue to admire his integrity, his passionate devotion to truth as he saw it, his desire to get to the root of things. Without walking in his footsteps, we can find in his career and achievements a stimulus to our imaginative understanding and practical commitment.

As a result of Owen's life and work, with the help of Owenite Missionaries, such as King, Lovett and Holyoake, Co-operatives started to spring up everywhere.

Owen opened Labour Exchanges to facilitate trade between them.

1834 – Owen headed the short-lived Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, which paid for strike pay to help workers to join forces. However, it collapsed after the conviction of the "Tolpuddle Martyrs", themselves followers of Robert Owen.

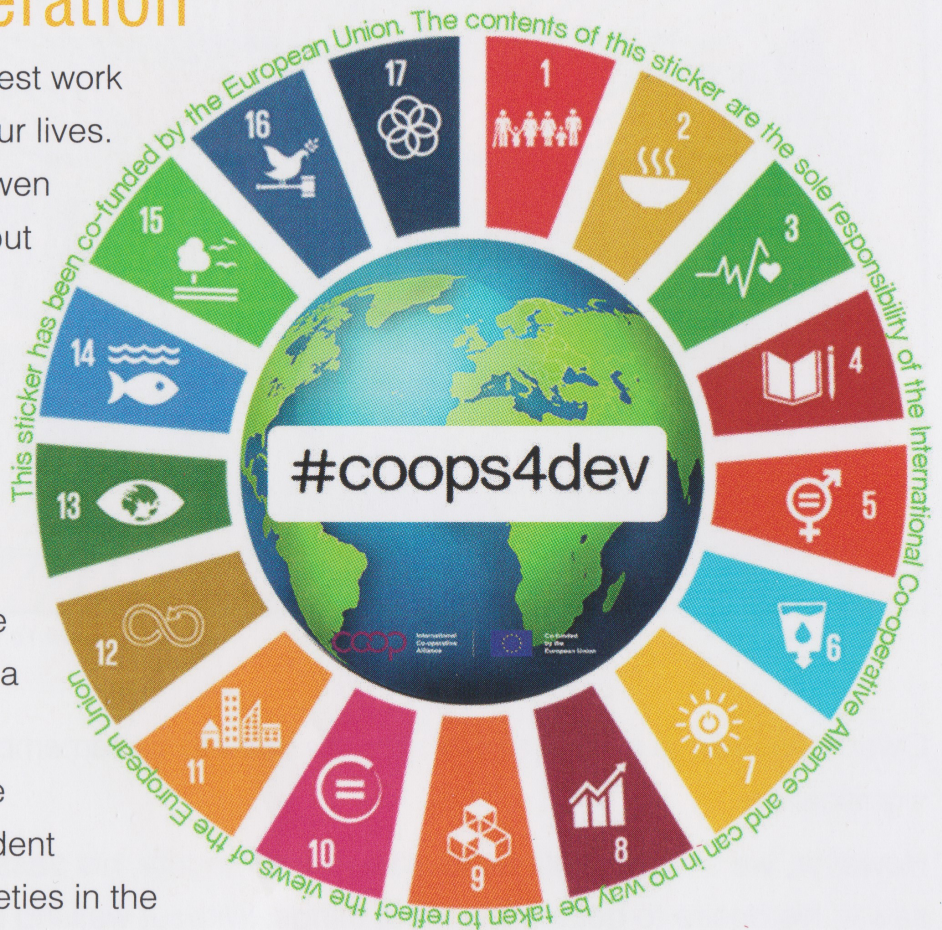
Owen was however the main campaigner to bring the Martyrs back from Australia, and organised one of the largest demonstrations ever seen in London.

Owen – the father of socialism, the co-operative movement, the trade union movement, factory legislation, corporate social responsibility, infant schools, the UK secular movement and the International Labour Organisation, the oldest specialised agency in the United Nations.

Owen was a Utopian because he believed that society could be transformed peacefully, without class struggle. Many have praised Owen and were inspired by him.

1858 – Owen returned home to Newtown in Wales, where he died.

Modern Co-operation



We are celebrating Owen's best work and the ideals that inspired our lives. There are varying views of Owen during his latter years of life but we wanted the concepts that Owen introduced for us to have a modern Co-operative Movement today.

Very few earlier co-operatives survived but one particular group known as the Rochdale Pioneers grew into a worldwide movement.

Central England Co-operative is one of the largest independent Consumer Co-operative Societies in the UK with roots that began in more than 70 local co-operatives across the Midlands and East Anglia.

Central England Co-operative's vision is to be "A Sustainable Society for all".

We work closely with the Co-operative Group, other retail co-op societies and the wider Co-operative Movement to provide a range of benefits for our members and local communities. As well as food stores and funeral services, we also offer our members educational, cultural and recreational activities.

Co-operative UK is the umbrella body for all co-operatives in the UK. Owned and controlled by their members, who are member-owned organisations. They also work to grow the co-operative economy by promoting, developing and uniting co-operatives.

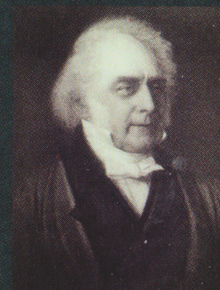
The International Co-operative Alliance unites, represents and serves co-operatives worldwide.

Co-operatives play a vital role and promote the UN Sustainable Goals.

This information has been taken from various resources and produced by Tanya Noon, Employee & Director of Central England Co-operative on behalf of the Membership & Community Councils.

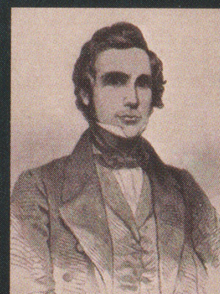
Three Historic Co-operators

Dr William King 1786 -1865



Dr King was a British physician and philanthropist and to many William King could be described as the father of consumer co-operation. King founded a co-operative store in Brighton and learning from the experience, started a paper, 'The Co-operator', to promote these ideas. The Co-operator had a wide circulation and a great influence in the emerging movement. Though only published for slightly over two years, the paper served to educate and unify otherwise scattered groups. King conceived of a middle way to achieving human rights and raising health standards in industrial society, he not only proposed Co-operation, but improvements in living standards, health and moral character.

William Lovett 1800 - 1877

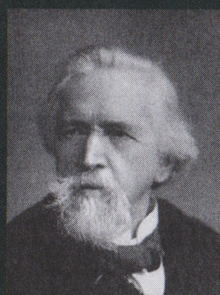


William Lovett was first and foremost a Co-operator, Chartist leader, political prisoner and Feminist (in a time before the term existed) and phenomenal campaigner.

Making an early living from carpentry, Lovett learned about the ideas of Robert Owen while attending evening classes. This led him to be politically motivated, joining Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. By 1828 he became secretary of the London Co-operative Trading Association and by 1831 the government had marked him as the most formidable agitator among working-men.

In 1836, he helped form the London Working Men's Association and was chosen as a leader of the group known as the Chartists. Lovett wrote the first draft of the Charter and included universal suffrage for men and women.

George Jacob Holyoake 1817 - 1906



G J Holyoake was the foremost Co-operative Owenite Missionary of the 19th Century. Born in Birmingham, Holyoake was a Whitesmith in his youth. After attending various lectures at which Owen spoke, Holyoake became a co-operator. In 1840 he applied and was accepted as an Owenite Social Missionary.

In 1845 Holyoake presided at the opening of the Rochdale Co-operative Store. The Co-operative Movement's umbrella organisations still occupy Holyoake House in Manchester, which was built in his memory and opened in 1911.

Holyoake was a promoter of Co-operation and used hyperbole to describe the growth and practical application of Co-operation.

Acknowledgements

Information contained within this booklet is credited to:

David Smith, *Co-operatives, wales.coop*

Debbie Robinson, *CEO – CEC*

Jane Avery, *President, CEC*

Elaine Dean, *Vice-President, CEC*

Richard Bickle, *Director, CEC*

John Boyle, *Co-operator*

Richard Watson, *Co-operator*

Tanya Noon, *Member & Community Relations Officer, CEC*

Robert Owen Museum, *Wales*

Co-operative Heritage Trust

Resources:

Robert Owen: Utopian realist by the Co-operative College and Co-operative Group;

Co-operative College papers, Number Six, April 1959 – Robert Owen in Retrospect and Dr Wm King, A Co-operative Pioneer.

Co-operative College – Robert Owen Day – November 2019

Useful websites:

www.membership.matters

www.uk.coop

www.ica.coop

www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment

www.robertowenmuseum.co.uk

www.newlanark.org



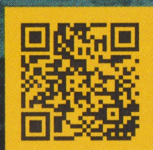
Painted by Sophie Oakley

The **co-operative** membership

Central England Co-operative

"The Membership & Community Council of Central England Co-operative supports events and programmes in the community. Our vision is to make a real difference for our members and their communities.

Co-operation, solidarity and self help underpins everything we do, which is why we support the people in our communities to learn, develop and achieve more".



For more information visit www.membershipmatters.coop